



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Trial of Sickness

David Anguish

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven (Jas 5.14–15).

At the [beginning of this series](#), I related a dinner conversation with a lifelong friend of my wife who, upon learning that I was to teach a short class series on James, said, “Oh, I *love* the book of James.” My wife replied, “I don’t.” As I emphasized then, my wife was making an observation about the way James’s practical admonitions convict and make us uncomfortable. But here I want to focus on our hostess’s comment and ask, “why *do* so many love the book of James?” I suggest much of the reason has to do with how James connects with some of the most real of life’s issues.

Nowhere is this more evident than when he refers to sickness and prayer. We know about sickness. We’ve been sick. We’ve watched family and friends battle sickness. We’ve cried as little children have battled horrible diseases, and experienced distress when people who’ve touched our hearts lost their battles. But it’s not just the physical discomfort and adverse outcomes that trouble us. Sickness confronts us with our mortality and vulnerability. It reminds us that there are things in life we cannot conquer, even with all our modern world’s advances. So, when we read that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (Jas 5.15), we perk up.

But then some questions about James's words disconcert us. Exactly what did he mean? Why do some for whom we pray not get well? Was it bad prayer? Or bad faith? Or, and this is worse for believers, did James get it wrong?

What does sin have to do with sickness? When I'm ill, is it because of some sin I committed? But what about the children who suffer? And what are we to make of the fact that some really bad people we know always seem to be healthy?

Furthermore, what did James mean when he said to call for the church's elders to anoint the sick person while they pray over him or her?

We'll postpone the last question until later and focus here on James's main idea in verses 14–15.

Sickness and Healing: Physical or Spiritual?

Richard Wells has observed that, "Illness calls for prayer only because it tests the soul" (Wells 1986, 106). His statement reminds us of James's larger point: prayer is part of the life of unwavering faith that seeks God's will, lives his way, and endures through the fiercest storms. It's important to remember as we study any part of this letter that trials set the tone for its entirety (1.2–4) and that the book's major theme is set against that backdrop. James wants us to understand that obedient faith never wavers in following God's way (1.5–8; 2.14–26; 5.1–11; etc.). Like everything else in the letter, his comments on sickness and prayer are focused on that theme.

As we look specifically at 5.14–15, analysis of James's vocabulary leads us to ask whether he is speaking of physical or spiritual illness and healing (for discussion of different views on this matter, see Wells 1986, 101–107; also Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 242–245; McCartney 2009, 252–255; and Moo 2000, 236–238). A comparison of different translations of verse 15a illustrates the dilemma:

- ESV: "And the prayer of faith will *save* the one who is sick ..."
- NASB: "and the prayer of faith will *restore* the one who is sick ..."
- NIV: "And the prayer offered in faith will *make* the sick person *well* ..."
- NLT: "Such a prayer offered in faith will *heal* the sick ..."

The word translated "save," "restore," "make well," or "heal" is $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ (*sōzō*) which we know usually refers to spiritual salvation, but at times refers to the healing of a physical malady. We read an example of the first meaning is Matthew 1.21: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will *save* his people from their sins." The second meaning is illustrated in Matthew 9.21–22: "for [the woman suffering from the discharge of blood] said to herself, 'If I only touch his garment, I will be *made well*. Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has *made you well*.' And instantly the woman was *made well*."

Which meaning did James intend in James 5.15? Could he have meant both? Is there any significance to the fact that he used *sōzō* four other times in this letter in the sense of spiritual salvation (Jas 1.21; 2.14; 4.12; 5.20)? As we think about that question, we should remember that context is always the final determinant of a word's meaning in a passage. But we should also keep in mind that most of James's first addressees would have *heard* his letter rather than read it. We should

therefore ask whether, after hearing how he had used it in the spiritual sense in 1.21; 2.14; and 4.12, they would have heard *sōzō* differently in 5.15.

We can ask similar questions about other words in James 5. The word rendered “sick” in verse 14 is ἀσθενέω (*astheneō*), to “‘experience weakness’ in body *be sick*” or to “‘lack capacity for someth.’ *be weak, be deficient*” (Danker 2009, 58). The word usually refers to physical illness but sometimes means spiritual weakness (cf. Rom 4.19; 8.3; 14.1–2). In verse 15, “sick” translates κάμνω (*kamnō*), “*be weary w. focus on distress in the face of circumstances,*” or “*be ill*” (Danker 2009, 186). The only other New Testament use of the word is in Hebrews 12.3 where it refers to discouragement, but it can refer to sickness. Also in verse 15, “raise up” translates ἐγείρω (*egeirō*), a word that fits the idea of someone getting up from his sick bed (cf. Mark 1.31; 2.9, 11–12), but which also is used to refer to resurrection (e.g., Mark 5.41; 6.14, 16). Verse 16’s word for “heal,” from ἰάομαι (*iaomai*), is also used in two ways (cf. Matt 8.8, 13; 13.15).

An analysis of *who* is commanded to act in verses 14–15 also raises the possibility of an idea broader than physical illness. The person who is sick (*astheneō*) is commanded to call for the elders who are in turn commanded to pray for the sick person (v. 14). James says that it is the *elders’* prayer that saves/restores and raises up the sick. Furthermore, they are designated “the elders of *the church*” (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*; only here in James) and the confessions and prayers referenced in verse 16 are communal in nature (the pronouns and verbs are plurals).

Notice too that James weaves together the ideas of sin, confession, and forgiveness. His statement, “and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (v. 15), reflects the typical Jewish way of connecting sin and sickness (cf. John 9.1–3), but that connection is not absolute. James does not say that *all* sickness is from sin, but rather that *if* (κἄν, *kan*) some does result from sin, the same “prayer of faith” will result in forgiveness. The appearance of “therefore” (οὖν, *oun*) at the beginning of verse 16’s focus on mutual confession and prayer indicates that verses 14–15 have been pointing to that concern.

So, What is James’s Point?

The fact that trials in the form of life’s misfortunes form the backdrop for James’s letter leads us to conclude that the natural sense of physical illness and healing is James’s primary point of reference in verses 14–15. But physical sickness can also be a specific source of spiritual crisis and thus a potential test for our loyalty in faith, which is the major theme of the epistle. James’s use of terms that can be taken to refer to both physical and spiritual illness, along with his references to the spiritual community’s involvement, indicate that he is continuing to focus on his exhortation to sustain an unwavering commitment of genuine faith.

How exactly “the prayer of faith” relates to that commitment is a subject for another time.

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought on James

“The close link between James’s moral teaching and his theology is demonstrated by the way in which theological propositions serve as warrants and premises for moral exhortations. James does not simply juxtapose the two sorts of statements. Instead, the theological always functions as the motivator of the moral. James grounds moral life in the relationship of creatures, and above all humans, with God... Thus, it is precisely James’s affirmation of God as the constant, universal, and ungrudging giver of all good and perfect gifts that grounds his moral imperative that humans live in a community not of competition but of collaboration.”

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 1995. “An Introduction to the Letter of James.” *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 35–36

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